

USING EUPHEMISTIC LANGUAGE FOR DISTASTEFUL CONCEPTS IN ENGLISH

SỬ DỤNG UYỂN NGỮ TRONG DIỄN ĐẠT CÁC KHÁI NIỆM NHẠY CẢM TRONG TIẾNG ANH

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ABSTRACT

Euphemism, a linguistic device that involves substituting milder terms for those that may be considered harsh or offensive, plays a vital role in the English language. It helps speakers navigate sensitive topics such as death, illness, and social taboos with tact and politeness, making conversations smoother and more culturally appropriate. Euphemisms also serve professional and political purposes, often softening the perception of negative events. However, while euphemisms can promote a polite discourse, they may also obscure the truth or create ambiguity, especially when used to downplay serious issues. This study aims to examine some key aspects of euphemism, including their functions and characteristics, as well as illustrate typical situations where euphemisms may be used to avoid taboo topics.

Keywords: Euphemism, communication, politeness, taboo topics.

TÓM TẮT

Uyển ngữ là một trong các biện pháp tu từ trong ngôn ngữ học. Thông qua việc sử dụng các từ/cụm từ với ý nghĩa nhẹ nhàng hơn thay thế cho những từ/cụm từ có thể bị coi là thô lỗ hoặc xúc phạm đúng cách, đúng lúc, uyển ngữ giúp mang lại hiệu quả đáng kể trong giao tiếp ngôn ngữ. Uyển ngữ giúp người nói xử lý các chủ đề nhạy cảm như cái chết, bệnh tật và những điều cấm kỵ trong xã hội một cách khéo léo và lịch sự, làm cho các cuộc trò chuyện trở nên suôn sẻ và phù hợp hơn về mặt văn hóa. Uyển ngữ cũng phục vụ các mục đích chuyên môn và chính trị, thường làm giảm nhẹ nhận thức về các sự kiện tiêu cực. Tuy nhiên, mặc dù uyển ngữ có thể thúc đẩy giao tiếp lịch sự, nhưng uyển ngữ cũng có thể tạo ra sự mơ hồ, đặc biệt khi được sử dụng để giảm nhẹ các vấn đề nghiêm trọng. Nghiên cứu này nhằm khám phá một số đặc điểm nổi bật của uyển ngữ, bao gồm chức năng, phân loại cũng như cung cấp các tình huống điển hình mà uyển ngữ có thể được sử dụng để tránh các chủ đề cấm kỵ.

Từ khóa: Uyển ngữ, giao tiếp, lịch sự, các chủ đề cấm kỵ.

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1. INTRODUCTION

It is obvious that to communicate effectively, people may choose various ways to reach such an ultimate goal. However, no ways do not have to deal with language. It cannot be denied that language is the basis of all human communication and interaction. Language helps us think, make decisions, express our own thoughts, attitude, feelings, and seemingly paradoxically, mask our feelings or disguise things we do not want to talk about, as well. For some simple topics, people feel no need to make it more complex and implicit. However, for some distasteful topics like sexes, death, and religions, a strong need to avoid explicit discussion of these topics really arises, and then euphemistic language is consulted in these cases [7]. Indisputably, euphemisms provide us with handy verbal tools to conceal what is unnecessary for our convenience. Just by labeling one thing by another, the fact and situation change as well. What we call things really affects how we perceive them. Euphemizing may be regarded as one of our more important intellectual resources for creating new

perspectives on a subject. Hugh Rawson, an American scholar, once said that euphemism is so deeply embedded in our language that no one of us can spend a day without euphemism, even those who claim to be straightforward [6].

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Definitions of euphemism

The term “**euphemism**” is derived from the Greek word “*euphemos*”, which means “good/ fortunate speech” or word of good omen”. The *eupheme* was originally a word or phrase used in place of a religious word or phrase that should not be spoken aloud. However, for the convenience of the speakers, they no longer use euphemisms on taboo topics only. They are now used prevalently in politics and military as well.

According to Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English (6th edition), **euphemism** is “*an indirect word or phrase that people often use to refer to something embarrassing or unpleasant, sometimes to make it seem more acceptable than it really is*”.

Similarly, Hugh Rawson in his book “A dictionary of Euphemism and other Doublespeak” stated that “Euphemisms are mild, agreeable or roundabout words used in place of coarse, painful or offensive ones” [6].

Another definition of euphemism is given in the Microsoft Encarta Reference Library 2002 that “*Euphemism is substitution of a delicate or inoffensive term or phrase for one that has coarse, sordid, or otherwise unpleasant associations as in the use of “lavatory” or “restroom” for “toilet” and “pass away” for “die”*”.

In general, euphemisms are roundabout words or phrases being used to soften, conceal or deceive the reality, which is unpleasant.

2.2. Classifications of euphemism

2.2.1. Positive euphemisms

According to Warren B. [8], positive euphemisms often inflate and magnify, making the euphemized items seem more important than they really are. These euphemisms aim at being tactful or polite by some softening reality by putting the things described into a better light.

The most common euphemisms of this type often fall into some occupational titles used to reinforce one’s self-image or strike one’s friends and acquaintances. For example, *counsel* instead of lawyer, *health care professional* for nurse or doctor, *administrative assistant* as

the name for secretary, *chief executive officer* as a replacement for *chairman of the board* or *president*. Besides, euphemistic words for dealing with disable or handicapped people are also categorized into the positive ones. Unconsciously, some language may be too biased to the ordinary person that makes others feel offensive and excluded. Common examples of this practice are: *chronologically gifted* (old), *cerebrally challenged* (stupid), *cosmetically different* (ugly), *differently-abled* (physically or mentally disable), *differently disadvantaged* (poor), *differently sized* (obese), *economically marginalized* (poor).

2.2.2. Negative euphemisms

According to Warren B. [8], negative euphemisms can reduce and replace the language that people prefer to avoid using. The euphemisms used in politics, military and war are typical of this type. The speakers and writers often seek to deceive or conceal unpleasant truth, in such cases, euphemisms become doublespeak (a more in-depth analysis of doublespeak is hereinafter). For instance, *harvesting* is used in place of *killing*, *collateral damage* is employed instead of *civilian casualties or deaths*, *relationship* is short form for *sexual relationship*, and *intestinal fortitude* means *guts*.

2.3. Functions of euphemism

Euphemism serves several critical functions in communication, each playing a unique role in shaping interactions and preserving social harmony. First and foremost, euphemisms are used to be polite. In everyday conversations, people often employ euphemisms to soften the impact of what they are saying, especially when the topic is sensitive or potentially offensive. For example, saying “passed away” instead of “died” is a way to show respect and sensitivity, thereby maintaining a level of politeness that is socially acceptable. Secondly, euphemisms can be of great help in minimizing the face losing threat to the addressees as well as the speakers. This concept is rooted in the theory of politeness, where “face” refers to a person’s social value or self-esteem in interactions. By using a euphemism, the speaker can avoid direct confrontation or embarrassment, thereby preserving both parties’ dignity. For instance, in a workplace setting, saying someone was “let go” rather than “fired” reduces the negative connotations and protects the individual’s self-esteem, as well as the speaker’s own professional rapport. Another significant

function of euphemism is to talk about forbidden or taboo topics in a way that is more socially acceptable. Topics like death, bodily functions, or sexuality can be uncomfortable to address directly. Euphemisms allow these subjects to be discussed without violating social norms or causing discomfort. For example, phrases like "using the restroom" instead of "going to the toilet" are used to navigate around the social discomfort associated with discussing bodily functions. Similarly, euphemisms can be employed to avoid hurting someone else's feelings. When delivering bad news or giving feedback, people may use softened language to cushion the emotional blow. For example, referring to someone as being "under the weather" instead of "sick" is a gentler way to express concern without amplifying worry. Finally, euphemisms can also be used to hide the truth from others, often serving a more strategic or even deceptive purpose. In politics or business, euphemisms can obscure the reality of a situation to make it more palatable or to avoid backlash. Terms like "collateral damage" for civilian casualties or "downsizing" for mass layoffs are examples of how euphemisms can mask the harshness of reality. While this function can be controversial, it highlights the power of language in shaping perceptions and controlling narratives. In summary, euphemism is a multifaceted tool in communication, serving to be polite, protect face, address taboo topics, avoid hurting feelings, and, in some cases, conceal the truth.

3. SOME COMMON EUPHEMISMS IN ENGLISH

Hugh [6] provided a selection of commonly used euphemisms, given as Table 1.

Table 1. Some common Euphemisms in English

Some common Euphemisms in English	Meanings
Administrative assistant	a sounding name for an important secretary
Altogether	naked
Body count	an inoffensive term for the number of deaths suffered
Buttocks	ass
Buxom	bog breasted
Carnal knowledge	sexual intercourse
Casualty	victim
Comfort station	public toilet
Correctional facility	prison

Derriere	ass, rear end
Disadvantaged	poor
Expire	to die
Family jewels	testicles
Family way	pregnant
Friendly fire	a situation in military combat where soldiers are accidentally harmed or killed by their own forces rather than by the enemy
Handyman's special	a more positive or neutral way of describing a property that may be in poor condition or need significant repairs
Hooker	prostitute
Lingerie	women's underwear
Little boy's room/washroom	toilet
Loss	death. (a term used in reference to the death of someone who was close)
Make love	engage in sexual intercourse
Member	penis
Not doing well	dying
Outhouse/ pass away/ to be no more/to be gone	to die
Pass water	to urinate
Period	menstrual period
Previous owned	second hand, used
Private parts	the genitals of males or females
Privy	outdoor toilet
Pro-choice	pro-abortion
Put down/ put to sleep	to kill
Remains	a dead body
See a man about a dog	to go to the bathroom
Senior citizen	elderly people
Sexually explicit	pornographic
Sight-deprived	blind
Slack fill	corporate doubletalk for partially empty
Social disease	venereal disease
Source of information	informant or spy
Special	handicapped
Stonewall	to obstruct justice. To admit nothing, deny, cover up
Surreptitious entry	an illegal break-in

Surveillance	spying
Sweetbread	the inner organs of an animal when presented as human food
Swinging	promiscuity characterized by wife-swapping or group sex, etc.
Technical surveillance	wiretapping
Triage	the process of deciding who to help and who to ignore.
Washroom	the toilet
White lie	supposedly harmless lie

Understanding and appropriately using common euphemisms in English as mentioned above is essential for effective communication. It helps soften sensitive topics, maintain professionalism, and avoid offending others, making interactions more respectful and tactful.

4. EUPHEMISMS FOR TABOO TOPICS

According to Spears Richard A. [7], words are window to the heart, or in other words; the words we speak out may provide the clearest insight into our character. Hence, for some delicate topics like sex, the excretive processes of the body, religious beliefs, we cannot talk thoughtlessly and at random. It is on these taboos ridden subjects that euphemism has an inevitable influence. At the same time, there are still major areas of society where there are significant restrictions in the vocabulary that can be used in everyday social interactions.

4.1. Religious euphemisms

Religion is one of the most distinguishing domains that has many things forbidden. The faithful are preached the Gospel or the words of God very often, which forbid them to speak out the evil and offensive words as well as swearing, with a view to reminding them not to speak ill words. The restricted items are thought to be either impure or holy, and the taboo is enforced to shield people from the object's influence.

The apostles is considered to be guilty of cursing by using the literal curseF words, or presenting the vulgar words in their vocabulary.

* Euphemisms for God

Euphemisms for God and Jesus are used by Christians to avoid taking the name of God in a vain oath, which would violate one of the Ten Commandments, in which the third one states "the prohibition of the use of the name of God for vain purposes".

An indirect ways of referring to God is "Golly". It is commly seen in the form of "By Golly" when someone wants to pour out his real thought and emotion which he does not feel like confiding to anyone else but God.

Together with "Golly", "Gosh" is probably the most common among many euphemisms others for "God". It is an expressive word, which is pronounced to convey the speaker's amazement and astonishment when something comes as a surprise.

Besides, the name of Jesus Christ shares the same case with that of God. People avoid speaking out the name of Jesus Christ as much as possible. The very simple reason lies in the fear of calling forth too-powerful religious forces. Jesus Christ, in most cases, is euphemized into 'gee" or "geez", which is used almost as God.

It is needless to say that except for these above-mentioned, there still exist many other substitutions, for example, *Supreme Being, Dad, George/Godfrey for God* and *Cheesus, Jeebus, Jeepers or Jeepers Creepers for Jesus Christ*. These variants show how the name of God and Jesus are circumvented for the very simple reason that we are not to use God's name in an irreverent manner.

* Euphemisms for mild oaths and swear words

Euphemisms are the only means that we have to circumspectly use God, Jesus Christ, the devil, hell and damnation in some sort of mild oath. They are often used to avoid invoking the power of the adversary, just because some words are supposed to possess a unique but largely unacknowledged power to call forth both good and evil.

Hereafter is the table of some other euphemisms used in daily language among the native speakers:

Table 2. Some Religious euphemisms

For curses:	For God's name:
Blame (damn)	By jove
Blazes (hell)	By jingo
Confound (damn)	Cripes (Christ)
Darn (damn)	Jiminey Cricket (Christ)
Doggone (God damn)	Judas Christoper (Christ)
Goldang (God damn)	Judas priest (Christ)
Gosh dum (God damn)	Egad, gadzooks, gad (God)
Heck (hell)	Golly, golly gee
Sam hill (hell)	Gosh, gosh

4.2. Euphemisms for death

In the fundamental dynamic of the universe, the progression of birth, growth, illness and death are the natural course that human existence shares. While the presence of a new-born baby in this life may bring happiness and hope to many other people, the departure of another from this life is still an unbearable mourn and grief. The loss of someone is so great that people try to avoid saying “**dead**” or “**die**” if possible.

In English, “**gone**”, “**pass away**”, “**gone to their reward**”, or “**to be no more**” are often used instead of “**die**”. This is because in Anglicist people’s mind death is nothing but parting, in which the departed come back his home, where God always opens his arms to welcome him. And not wanting to refer directly to the unpalatable fact, they tend to replace “**die**” by such softer words. For example, when Queen Victoria breathed her last, the Los Angeles Times had its article title as: “**Passing of Victoria**” but not “**Death of Victoria**”. This is resulted from the fact that when she was alive, Queen Elizabeth was highly respected. Therefore, it is impossible and naked to say plainly that she was dead. “**Pass away**” can help show both sorrow and sympathy.

In other cases, the term “Heaven” is often associated with. Dead is taken as untroubled as a journey to God, to a better place. The deceased may be said to have “**gone to the Happy Hunting Grounds**”, or “**gone to the mansions of rest**”. The soldiers and commanders in military and war that are officially recognized and accredited are respectably said to have “**passed to his great reward**” instead of **dying**.

Sailors also have their own nautical terms about death. It is commonly engraved on the epitaph of the tale sailors that “**safe anchorage at last**”. Their life is likened to a sea voyage, floating and drifting here and there, and death is the last destination to cast anchor at.

It will be a mistake if the way doctors and nurses announce or speak about their patients’ serious state or death is not included herein. It is noticeable that the word “**death**” is seldom heard in hospital wards. From a sense of delicacy or for greater exactness, “**to cease breathing**” or “**to expire**” are the popularly used expressions.

To the death of domestic animal or pet, people have different euphemistic phrases to deal with it. Normally, “**put away/ down/to sleep**” are three different ways of

not mentioning death in connection with animals whose lives have become burdensome to themselves or their owners.

Thus, in English, death is approached in various ways in different situations.

4.3. Excretory euphemisms

* *Urination and Defecation*

Other areas of daily life, which require the heavy use of euphemisms, include anything to do with bodily functions - anything but breathing. In fact, the term “bodily function” itself is a euphemism, basically for urination and defecation. It is the unpleasantness of these functions that encourages the use of euphemism or is it the vulnerability that’s also unmentionable.

Everyone can realize the importance and indispensability of euphemism for potty talk, indisputably. It can bring about immeasurable consequences to those who commit a breach of delicacy. Moreover, this is such an essential part of life, happening day in day out, that people cannot get rid of or deny it. In such situation, euphemisms or milder and softer but implicative words prove to be the best way out. There are thousands of such in use in various situations.

Everyday, if we pay attention to the way the others or ourselves deal with it, some common potty talk can be identified. Imagine you are in a restaurant and you have a need to piss. Of course, you cannot ask the server directly that: “where can I piss?”. If so, how rude and impolite you have become, as you have violated the social formality. Instead, the question should be: “**where can I powder my nose?**”, it equals to “**where is the toilet room?**”. This euphemism is used almost exclusively by women. Men, meanwhile, have their own separate ones for the mission” the most common is “**I have to see a man about a dog**”.

Another humorous potty talk is “**the call of the nature**” (often “**answer the call of nature**” in full). This vivid euphemism is somewhat for fun and only articulated when there is a close tie between the one to address it and the one to listen, often in informal contexts. It can be shortened into “**I have to pay a call**” to announce that she/he has to go to the powder room, of course will be understood by the others.

* *Euphemism for lavatory*

Not only the doing but also the place where it takes requires the tremendous help of euphemisms. It is

noteworthy that the English language, despite its rich vocabulary, lacks any non-euphemistic words for them. In other word, the flourish of lavatory euphemisms is an inevitable result of the absence of precise English word for it. Their sheer number indicates the strength of the underlying taboo. The most convincing example to be named first must be “WC”. It was edited out of “**water closet**”, which is dated from the mid-eighteenth century, but it was a long time before they became common.

Similarly, “**toilet**” is another well-established euphemism that is rather recent import. It comes from toilette, dressing room, which is diminutive of toile, cloth. It has gone along way before reaching the present meaning as a lavatory. In the nineteenth century, people began to speak of “**toilet articles**” or “**toilet paper**” (which is called bathroom tissue now).

Obviously, there are times when we have to present a much nicer picture than reality. Euphemism, with its positive connotations, proves to be an effective means.

5. CONCLUSION

Distasteful as come conversational topics may be, they can never be excluded from discussions. Until now, euphemisms have proved to be prevalent in communication among the natives only. They are still something new and scarcely applied in non-native’s language, for it is not simple and easy at all. Still, not until taboo, obscene and hard-to-say subjects exist are euphemisms essential and indispensable in communication. Having an insight which they operate, at the same time to the native speaking style, and know how to deal with a delicate and tactful subject appropriately according to the circumstance. However, as a matter of fact, we have not widely and naturally employed euphemisms into situational contexts as the native speaker does. As a saying goes: “**When in Rome, do as the Romans do**”, it is also the simple reason why producing grammatically correct sentences is not enough. More importantly, we should use the native language more fluently and speak more-native-likely.

In conclusion, using the right euphemisms at the right time, in the right place and to the right person, plays an important role in maintaining a harmonious interaction. This has been approved by the success of many politicians, psychologists, negotiators and ourselves in some situations. It can make a real big difference in reaction from and attitude of the hearers with just a small difference in the language we utter.

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